Tape #78
Interview with George Maginnis
Date: 8/31/08
Interview conducted by Chuck Dunkerly
Transcribed by Jeffrey Rhoten and Josh Karpel
Checked by

Tape #N78

00:16
CD: So George, what was your age, rank, and job at the time when you first got to Pearl Harbor?

00:28
GM: Now? When we first uh…well when we went into Pearl Harbor, right, you want to know my age? Well it was about, I really don't remember, and…early twenties I guess, somewheres in there.

00:55
CD: What did you do? What was your...

GM: I was the ships gunners mate, the gunner. In fact I had all the guns, I was the ships gunner. But I was a white house, I was a First Class Gunner's Mate, and I had all the guns and the ammunition was on the ship. So uh…what else.

CD: What was a normal day like on your ship? Just walk me through a day when you were in port or at sea.

01:31
GM: Well on a survey ship you've done every damn thing. You got ready to go here, and go there, and do this. This is a working ship; this wasn't one of them pleasant cruises, you know. So during the day…we got everything ready, whatever they needed, and if there were…anything, compared to gunnery I had it, and that's the reason I was sent on this ship, because I knew about dynamite. And most of the sailors at that time knew nothing about dynamite, how to blow up things, but I did, of course I had went to school for that. **(02:20)** So, that was mostly what I was doing anyway. And I got it – whatever they wanted me to do, I did it.

CD: When was your battle station when you were drilled general quarters?

02:36
GM: I want to tell you about that. Okay, now you remember I told you it was late on a Saturday afternoon. We come in and tie it up. And the next day when the war started I was standing – I was up on the fan tail, which is the stern of the ship talking to another guy I was there with, these were all white hats, these were all first class, the other one was a first class quartermaster and he was standing on the fantail ready to run the flag up. And Red Camel came walking

up, he was a first class boson mate, he come whooping and shooting, you know, just shooting, talking. And there was somebody else there, I don't know who that was. Anyway, we were standing there talking, and all of a sudden all this noise kept moving over us, and I said, 'what the hell is that?' And it was, somebody was shooting at us, I looked up, it was all these airplanes was flying over top of us. I could almost touch them. And I looked at it, and I seen a 'what the'...I said, 'Jonesy' – he was the quartermaster – 'Jonesy, these are Japanese!' I says, 'sound general quarters, they're firing on us!' So he run over and sound general quarters. I said to Red, 'Red, run that gun over there.' It was a 3 inch gun over there, the kind that you operated, one guy could operate them. I said, 'you go man the gun, I'll open the ready locker and load you up.' I said, 'I'll load the gun.' So I went over and picked up a shell, took it out of the ready locker, slammed it into the gun, and I said, 'you're ready.' He says, 'here's a Japanese plane coming right at us.' I said, 'oh, Christ.' When it gets a little closer, I said, 'fire.' So he pulled the trigger and fired, and we could see the pilot in that plane, it was so close, it was coming down alongside the ship. And he fired right into the cockpit. And then the plane went down beside the ship and sank in the bay. The Navy Yard pulled that plane up later, about a week later. It had a, the airplane was intact, practically, and there was a pilot sitting in it, but he had no head. What we did, we blew his head off. And by that time, all the regular gun crews were up on the guns by that time. And they sent word down, 'what do we do?' I said, 'you fire at anything that's got a red ball on it. Fire on them, don't worry about it.' And after I done that and I seen the plane go down, I thought to myself, 'what the hell have you done, George?' Cause I had no orders to shoot at anybody. Here I am, I fired, I knocked down a plane already, and the gunnery officer wasn't even up there till later. But one thing I'll tell you, I was ready to fire because I had my ready lockers all full of ammunition, all you had to do was go to the ready locker, take a shell out, put it in the gun, and fire. The reason I'd done that, we'd been in the Atlantic Ocean, and we were running with that outfit that, where they got a big group of cargo ships and sent them in a group to Mermansk in Russia, but the Germans had submarines over there, and they were sinking them. And that's why I had that ready locker all ready to fire. And the gun you could fire them from. So, all the rest of them around there, me, in the Pacific, wasn't ready. All their ammunition was locked up under key. They couldn't find no shells to shoot, but I was ready. That's...is that alright?

07:58
CD: Perfect. It's great.

Pause

08:03
CD: What happened the rest of that day? What you saw and what you did for the rest of that day?

GM: You probably won't even believe me. Anyway, we were firing and we knocked down a plane too, one of my gunners did it. And everything, fire, and people running back, and all this crazy stuff. Then there was a lull, all the Jap

planes shot up everything they had and they went back to the carriers they were from. And they come over the loudspeaker. They wanted somebody to run an open motor launch over to Ford Island. Nobody volunteered to take that damn boat out across the bay because everything was going on. I says, 'hell, I know how to run a boat.' And all my guns are shooting, I got gunners on each of them guns, and they know what to do, so I said, 'hell, I'll go take it.' So I went down, and the boat was along, it was a 50 foot open motor launch, alongside down the ladder. I went down there, and there was a young black boy in the bow, he was the bow hook, and there was another guy that was the engineer of the motor. I said, 'okay fellows, let's go.' I look down, I say, 'let's get her going.' So they started the boat, turned it around, and headed her into North Island. Well, the first...we went right down Battleship Row, the first one we come to was the Oklahoma. The Oklahoma was turning over at that time, and a little bit, right next to it, was the Arizona, the Arizona was blowing up all over the damn place. And I forget the name of the other, there was another carrier, I mean another battleship over there, and I don't remember her name, and I went on into North Island. And when I got in there, some officer come out, and he says, 'hey they're waiting for you at the ammunition depot.' How the hell did they know I was coming down here? But anyway, he said, 'you go down to the ammunition depot at Waburst Point, they're waiting for you.' So I took the boat, me and them 2 kids, some explosion scared the hell out of everybody, but we went on down the river up to Waburst Point where the ammunition depot was. And they were waiting for me, and we pulled alongside, and there was kanakes there working, and they lowered a couple platforms of 50 cal machine gun down into the boat. So I left there and went back up to where I originally started on Ford Island, and they took the ammunition off for wherever it was supposed to go, I don't know. Then, after, I said, 'the hell with this, I'm going back to the ship.' So I told the kids, 'we're going home.' So, we turned around, we went back to the ship, and everything was still wondering what the hell was going on, but that was the end of my day I guess, for that. That was clearly when it was all over.

12:18
CD: Can you describe what else you saw when you were motoring by Battleship Row?

GM: Say that again.

CD: Can you describe-

GM: Oh, oh. Okay. When I was going by the battleships, the Oklahoma was turning over. She rolled over on her side. And I found out later the reason it went turned over, they were standing by for lower deck inspections on that ship, and they had all the hatches open, everything was open, so when it tipped over a little bit farther, all the sea water rushed in there, and that's what turned it over. Of course, she had a lot of bomb hits on her by then. And right next to her was the Arizona, and she was still blowing up. When they dropped the bomb on the Arizona, it was a armor piercing bomb, in other words, you have to be a gunner to know all this, what the hell this stuff is. And it went right through the

superstructure, right down into the magazine on the Arizona, where the ammunition was, and that's what was blowing up. And I don't remember about the other one, there was one more, but I don't remember much about it. I was busy looking where the hell they wanted me at. You gotta realize, this was a day that you wasn't thinking about just regular things, you were running here and you were running there, and your mind's going a hundred miles an hour. So anyway, that's the way I did it. I wanted to let you know that I was ready to shoot. I was ready to fire. And when they wrote in there, 5, 6 minutes by the time Red got on the gun, and I put the shell out of the ready locker which I had open, I had it unlocked. But I was ready to fire because I come out of the Atlantic Ocean, and we were ready to shoot at submarines, German submarines, at that time. How was that?

15:13
CD: Beautiful, it was perfect.

GM: You'll have to straighten that out for me.

CD: We have people that can do that. What's your most vivid memory of that day?

GM: A vivid memory?

CD: Your clearest memory of that day. What just resonates with you as the one thing that stands out the most?

GM: Actually, when I looked up and seen them damn planes flying over us, that noise, and I seen the red ball. When I said, 'Jonesy, they're Japs!' He said, 'yeah.' I said, 'go sound general quarters.' All he had to do was walk over to where everything was and turn a switch, and he did, he sounded general quarters. There was, remember most people were sleeping in, there wasn't no officers on the bridge or anything else when I gave orders to fire. And after a minute or two, I think 'George, what the hell have you done?' And it took me a little second to get my composure or whatever you call it back to it and go on with what I was supposed to do. But I did stop for a second to think, 'what have I done?' I was shooting airplanes down, and nobody gave me information to shoot it. But nobody ever said anything later on. They all put it down that they were...but they write up Red Camel, the guy that was pulling the trigger for me, they wrote him up, and I think he got upgraded to something, I don't know what it was. We all wound up becoming Chiefs sooner or later. Which is good for me.

17:42
CD: What's your proudest moment of that day, George?

GM: Proud?

CD: Were you? What was your emotion, what did you feel when you were there?

GM: I'll tell you the truth, I didn't feel anything. You gotta remember, we've been trained for years on the gun and gunnery, of what to do. There's many, many drills that I went through on different ships about what you're supposed to do when something like this arrives. Actually, I just automatically done what I was in my mind what to do, to run over and do this, which I did. I was drilled to do it, so I didn't think nothing of it. I just did what the hell, what I was supposed to do. And that was go over and shoot down somebody. I'm a little bit different from anybody else, but that's the way I am. I'm from Philly, man. What do you got going now?

19:02

Everybody laughs.

19:21
CD: What did you do the next day? After the attack, what changed? What happened to you?

GM: Nothing. We just going back, cleaning up the guns, and get ready to go into another. You know, I had to keep them weapons ready to go at any time. So we cleaned them up, cleaned all the gun barrels out and everything, moved ammunition up to where we needed it, and stuff like that. We got ready for another attack.

19:58
CD: Have you been – sorry, go on.

GM: I wasn't prepared to make that run to the ammunition depot, that was a little extra, but somebody had to do it. And I guess I was elected to do it. Cause nobody else would go. Nobody else would get in that boat and go across the bay with everybody firing and shooting at them, but old stupid George. I didn't give a shit, oh I gotta stop cussing, but that's the way we talk when we're together.

20:47
CD: Doesn't bother me, George.

GM: No, but it's not right. George, shut up. But I was trained to that stuff, I was trained to fire, I was trained to do when a, when the time come – and the thing, I had a spent a long time in China, and it was always fighting in China, there was always something going on. But I was used to it, anything that was gonna happen, I was trained to do it, and I did it.

21:36
CD: Did you lose any friends or buddies that day?

GM: Not that day, but I did later on. After the war was going on, I had two friends, two Italians, one was tall, one was short, but we run around together. Mario would get drunk and he would always want me to sing *Lunza Lunza*, you

know, and I'd have to sing. When we go into a place drinking, it would start the whole thing going on…Jock, he got captured in the Philippines, and he was in a prison camp in the Philippines. And then the Japanese decided, I don't know what the hell made them do it, but anyway, they decided to move the prisoners from there to Japan to work in the coal mines or some mines up there, and Jock was one of them. Jock was taken with the other prisoners and put in a Japanese cargo ship to go back to Japan. Well, you remember, we had entered the war then, and we had our own submarines out there, and when the cargo ship with the prisoners on it left Manilla to join the fleet out there, their fleet, the Japanese fleet, one of our submarines sank it. So Jock went down with them. So that was the first one of them got killed. The other one, Mario, was a tall guy, and he was one of the guys you couldn't tell anything to. Anyway, he was standing up and they killed him on Corrigador, somebody shot him, over there somewhere. So I lost both of my good buddies. One was shot, the other went down with his ship.

24:00
CD: What was the song Mario liked you to sing?

GM: What was the song? It's an Italian song. *Lona Lona Metza Mora* I can't do it now, it's a lively song, you know. If you want to start a group of people, especially if they've been drinking a few beers, you start singing that kind of thing, and everybody gets into it, everybody gets into it, they're all singing. Mario used to get me to sing it, 'hey George, sing the song.' He was a good guy. He'd get mad at me once in a while, and I was kind of skinny in them days, and he'd say, 'I'm gonna pick you up and hang you on that hook up there.' But he never did. We used to have a hell of a good time. But that's the way it goes, bud. Just like you say, everything's got to change. But I'm glad now that I'm still alive and done all these things, and I've helped a lot of people to stay alive. I can't find no problem with that. You know, when I run that boat to the ammunition depot, one of the guys that lowered the ammunition down, I was talking to him, he later joined the club I belonged to, the Pearl Harbor Survivors, and I looked at him and I say, “hey, I remember you from the ammo depot.” And I run into Lee this morning, and I knew these guys, you know.

26:10
CD: Have you been back to the memorial?

GM: Oh yeah. I, what the hell was I going, I was going somewhere, oh I went back to Hawaii, we stopped in there for some reason. Yeah, but now they've built the memorial up and all that stuff, it's a lot…if you've never been there and if you go to Hawaii, I suggest you go out to see the monument, it's there.

CD: I've been there. When you're out there on that monument over that battleship, you have any thoughts that go through your mind, today?

GM: Of course.

CD: What are they?

GM: Thinking about that thing when it was blowing up. You're walking across and the ship that was on is still there. They built the monument over what was left of the ship. Of course I remember what it was doing that day when it was blowing up. And she was blowing. I guess I'm a little different from other people, I don't know. Nothing seems to bother me too damn much, you know. Well, like I said, I'm from Philly. That's about the best I can do.

27:47
CD: What's the lesson of Pearl Harbor for us today?

GM: Say that again.

CD: What should we learn from Pearl Harbor?

GM: Be ready to fire! Well, you all should, you should be proud of people in Pearl Harbor cause they went, all the people, all the guys out there. You know, there was a lot of ships in there, smaller ships and stuff like that, and they all were standing by to fire or do something, whatever happened. But they all were trying to do something. And, well, it's over with now and I can't get real worked up over anything, and I don't know, you talk to some of these young fellows, some of the people around, they don't know what Pearl Harbor was. They don't have no idea what it was all about. They should teach something about it in school to show them what they did, but they don't. I don't know, I don't want to get into that stuff because I don't think we're doing enough for it, that's all.

END OF TAPE